

# Christian Community

A Program Service of the Council for Social Action of the  
Congregational Christian Churches, 289 Fourth Ave., New York 10, N. Y.,  
and the Commission on Christian Social Action of the  
Evangelical and Reformed Church, 2969 West 25th St., Cleveland 13, Ohio

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## We Face Lent

As we face the Lenten season with its summons to look to the foundations of the Christian life, it is well to remind ourselves that Christian social action grows out of the profound conviction that "God so loved the world that He gave His Son." Otherwise it becomes a mere fad, a superficial striving to "do something," or perchance a wistful humanitarian idealism.

At the same time, we need to be reminded that it is this world of persons and of things that God loved and that it is this world in which our Christian faith is to live itself out in deeds. For "faith without works is dead" and conviction which does not work itself out in our social relations is irrelevant to a major portion of man's life.

For these reasons we have asked one of the distinguished theologians within the fellowship of the coming United Church to sketch for us some of the implications of the Christian view of life for our action in church and society. Dr. Bennett's article merits careful reflection. It will not tell you what legislation you should support nor what injustices you should resist. But it will help to make clear the motive and the point of view from which all such action proceeds.

May it be used as one of the resources by which self-searching leads to renewed self-dedication.

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For suggestions as to how the material in this issue may be used, social action committees are referred to the recommendations for action under the heading "To the Social Action Committee," on page 2, and to "Discussion Questions" on page 3.

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"The greatest contribution that the Church can make to the renewal of society is for it to be renewed in its own life in faith and obedience to its Lord. Such inner renewal includes a clearer grasp of the meaning of the Gospel for the whole life of men."

"Worship and witness have sometimes been held in separation, but they belong inseparably together, as the fulfilment of the great command that men should love God and should love their neighbour as themselves."

—Report of the First Assembly,  
World Council of Churches.

## Christian Faith and Social Action

SOME CONTRIBUTIONS FROM CONTEMPORARY  
CHRISTIAN THOUGHT

By John C. Bennett

There has been a pervasive change in Christian thinking in the past two decades, a change which has confirmed the central concern that underlies social action and which has at several points corrected the expression of that concern. It is sometimes suggested that contemporary tendencies in theology are in conflict with social action but this is far from the truth. Most leaders of theological thought today are committed to social action.

It is significant that the World Council of Churches through its Study Department, which is very sensitive to currents of theology, has projected a plan for the next few years involving three major subjects. The first is "Christian Action in Society." The second is "The Evangelization of Man in Modern Mass Society." The third is about the Bible—and note that the first interest in connection with the Bible is the discovery of Biblical guidance for social action. Not only the people who usually stress social action are expected to do so in this program. Also, the concern for evangelism is to be closely related to the ways in which modern industrial society affects the souls of men. The Biblical scholars are producing a volume on social action. This is one straw but it is quite significant and, taken in connection with Amsterdam's great emphasis upon social action, it indicates clearly that this concern is close to the center of the mind of the contemporary Church.

It should also be noted that one of the by-products of the spread of Communism in Asia has been to make the whole

missionary movement realize that the Church as it touches the life of Asia must be as alert to social problems as the Communists. One may hope that it is not too late; but there has been a sudden waking up to the fact that a *socially irrelevant Church or a socially conservative Church will be by-passed by history*. This is not the best reason to stress social action. It should come spontaneously from the awareness of the love of God for all of His children and of the *appalling contrast between what God's love means and what the comfortable Christians have permitted the vast majority of men to endure through the centuries*. But the Church often learns the meaning of its own Gospel under the pressure of events.

The recent developments in theology to which I referred at the beginning have provided some correction that was needed in the way in which many modern Christians have understood their social responsibility and they also may point to sources of power for action when we are most perplexed. I shall mention several ways in which our attitudes toward social action may be corrected by a better understanding of our Christian faith.

### A Drive Toward Realism

1. *The realistic view of the human situation that we learn from Christian teaching about man should help us to avoid abstract, idealistic programs which do not take account of the actual historical conditions under which we live.* Both conservatives and social liberals of various stripes have often been at fault here.



Conservatives have frequently assumed that it was sufficient to trust the good character or the idealism of business men and employers and they have failed to realize that there is no one so good that he can be trusted with unchecked and uncriticized economic power over others. The good employer needs to be confronted by the power of labor unions. The white man needs to be checked by the political power of the Negroes in the North and in the South. It is just a fact about ourselves which we can learn from Christian teaching that we are all inclined to find ways of putting ourselves and our own group at the center of whatever stage is important to us, that we naturally see the world from a narrow and biased point of view, often in the light of our own economic advantage, and that we have a marvelous gift for finding reasons to justify policies that are in line with that point of view, that we seldom stir ourselves to change any social condition of which we are beneficiaries until some one brings pressure on us. This is not cynical, for Christians, if they face these facts about themselves, can do a great deal to change their natural attitudes; but if they think only of high principles and ideals and forget these facts about themselves they are likely to use these very principles and ideals to defend their interests.

Social liberals have often made the mistake of overlooking the real conditions of life by assuming that some new group, if given power that is unchecked or uncriticized, will be free from the temptations of the old groups that they have struggled against. The illusions about the Soviet Union have ceased to charm the minds of many Americans for the facts about Soviet power are now well known to us. But we may have illusions about the power of labor. Without taking back one thing that has been said about the moral claims of the labor movement through its years of struggle, first of existence and then for a position of economic and political power, we can today keep our eyes open to the need of keeping labor under criticism in the light of the needs of the community as a whole. The same applies to organized

### TO THE SOCIAL ACTION COMMITTEE

1. Invite your pastor to present Dr. Bennett's article, to interpret it and to lead a discussion based on it—at your committee meeting, in an adult Bible class, or with some other group in the church. (See discussion questions suggested on page 3.)

2. Arrange for the display, sale, or review of one or more of the books discussed in this issue.

3. Enlist a group to cooperate in the World Council's Study program. For materials write to the Commission on Christian Social Action, the Commission on Evangelism (both at 2969 West 25th St., Cleveland 13, Ohio), or to Rev. Robert S. Billheimer, World Council of Churches, 297 Fourth Ave., New York 10, N. Y.

4. Keep in touch with your Senators, reminding them of the urgency of Displaced Persons and Social Security legislation (both passed by the House of Representatives). Encourage both your Senators and Representatives to act favorably on fair employment practices and civil rights legislation.

agriculture. We knew a generation ago that it applied to organized business.

It is not so common in the Church but it is very common among secular idealists to have illusions about world government. World government now would not alter by one iota the location of power in the world. It would be impossible to have world government without first achieving real agreement on essential matters of security between the two great centers of power. Lacking that agreement we must move along with less grandiose schemes, seeking on the one hand to prevent minor explosions that may lead to war and, on the other, to create a situation in which agreement between east and west may become possible. We must keep the door open toward the latter goal while we admit that we do not know how it is to be brought nearer. If Toynbee is right in suggesting that the cold war may last fifty years, we will need a lot of patience! There is an element of tragedy here that is beyond all of our best plans and we shall have to learn to live with it, without illusions and without despair.

One of the most important changes in the minds of Christians who are so-

cial liberals is their loss of confidence in doctrinaire socialism. This has come in part because the danger of concentrating economic power in the state has been dramatized in modern totalitarian developments. It has come in part because even democratic Socialist experiments have shown that the problem of incentive is much more difficult than either conservatives or liberals used to think. Though it is necessary to provide social security for the population as a whole, there is no denying that great new problems, spiritual as well as economic, will come with such security. *We cannot back away from a considerable measure of economic and social planning but what is wanted is ingenuity and fresh experiment in the development of social forms of activity which are not controlled fully by the state.* Among the members of Congregational and Evangelical and Reformed churches it is still important to help people to be open toward such developments. Private economic power cannot be allowed to dominate the community in the interests of those who control it for profit; nor can the anarchy of uncontrolled capitalism be allowed to throw the whole community into a depression. These issues are too complicated and too fateful to be dealt with in terms of the old slogans and the old systems of either right or left.

Such a change of emphasis may come chiefly from the hard lessons of experience but it will be more constructive if this experience is illuminated by the Christian understanding of the heights and depths and complexities of man's nature. It is interesting that such a political analyst as Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., finds himself making contact with Christian theology at this same point.

### Antidote to Despair

2. *A second contribution of Christian theology to social action is the doctrine of "justification by faith."* This may seem very remote but in some situations it is actually the only ultimate source of what I have called *action without either illusions or despair*. There is a modern equivalent of Luther's despair as a monk. It is the despair of the modern Christian idealist who cannot find any



course of action that is good enough. He may be tempted to disguise the realities from himself and to embrace some one line of action, convincing himself that it is the one solution, that it is much better than it is. Or he may be tempted to withdraw from the whole political and social front and concentrate on something else. If he is a reader of these words he will not be able to go into a monastery, but he may lose interest in the most fateful issues of social action and become entirely preoccupied with the relatively good things that he can do from day to day as a parish minister. He may turn to theology and liturgy as escapes, but I hasten to say that both of these could also enable him the better to remain on the more difficult spot from which he would like to escape. He may escape by giving himself to propaganda for something that may be possible in a different historical situation. (Propaganda for world government may sometimes be an escape of that sort.)

Professor Emil Brunner in *The Divine Imperative* says that we always want to wait until we are somewhere else before we act. The spot where we are is seldom good enough as an opportunity for action. That book is a presentation of Christian social ethics on the basis of the doctrine of justification to which I have referred. It is not easy to make clear what is involved here in a few words. This doctrine means that the Christian does not win his status before God by his moral achievements, by the perfection of his acts. Always he must depend upon the mercy of God. Always we live by grace and not by the completeness of our own righteousness. "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God—not because of works, lest any man should boast." (Ephesians 2:8). Those words from the New Testament have come to have great meaning for our generation. This way of looking at life releases us from fear of action when the best action that is open to us is imperfect.

Not only does faith in God's mercy take the place of confidence in our own righteousness but faith in God as the Lord of history is a basis for hope in the

darkest times when it is difficult to be confident about any way forward. An American can have a sense of various hopeful alternatives ahead of his own country, but Christians in many lands have no such sense of an open future. For one thing, they know that they have very little to say about their own destinies because the decisive power in the world lies elsewhere. The storms that may lie ahead in the world are beyond all calculation though there is no reason for the assumption that the worst of them are inevitable. At best we shall live for years with frustrating conflicts and with the threat of catastrophe. Christian faith should enable us to live in the world as it is—again I say—without illusions and without despair. This world is not only the world portrayed by the newspapers. It is also the world in which the Word became flesh, the world which God has visited to redeem his people.

### Liberating the Gospel

3. *We should also come to have a broader conception of social action and take seriously not only the most obvious and direct forms of action but also the total impact of the Church upon the world.*

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

How does Christian social action depend on a Christian understanding of God, man, the world, and the Bible? To what extent can a man be an effective Christian without concerning himself with Christian doctrine or Bible study? To what extent can he be such without engaging in community service or political action?

If a Christian believes in world government, total abstinence, socialism, pacifism, the labor movement or some other social goal, under what conditions can he work for these ends without indulging in what Dr. Bennett calls *illusions*?

What does *justification by faith* mean for the person whose job requires him to make decisions involving both good and evil consequences? for the one whose decisions result in more evil than good?

Do you know of people from whom Christ has been hidden because of a lack of social concern on the part of Christians? How can your church help to correct this?

All that we do can have a double effect. In so far as it is a contribution to the solution of some social problem, it takes its place along with other contributions on that level. But *it may also be a way of showing forth more clearly the true meaning of the Gospel. It may help to purge the Church itself of much that hides Christ from the people. It may have endless consequences indirectly through its effect upon the mission of the Church as a whole. For it has been a lack of emphasis upon social action in the Church in recent centuries that has done incalculably much to cripple the Church and to hide the gospel from large sections of humanity.* Those who are engaged in this specialized work of social action may see themselves in a double role. It is the role of those who are commissioned by the Church to do a job in the world. And it is the role of servants of the Church who can help to create a new situation in the Church itself so that the Church can in new ways change persons and cultures through the power of Christ's spirit.

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The Reverend John C. Bennett, professor of theology and ethics at Union Theological Seminary, New York, has served the Congregational Christian Churches, the Federal Council of Churches, and the World Council of Churches in many capacities. Among his books are "Christianity and Communism," "Christian Ethics and Social Policy," and "Christian Realism."

### Call Economic Study Conference

The second National Study Conference on the Church and Economic Life, sponsored by the Federal Council of Churches, will be held in the Hotel Statler, Detroit, Michigan, February 16 to 19. An able delegation, including businessmen, labor leaders, farmers, educators and public officials as well as clergymen, has been appointed by the responsible officials of the Congregational Christian and Evangelical and Reformed Churches.

All delegates of both denominations, whether representing these bodies or some other agency, are invited to a fellowship breakfast at the Statler on Friday, February 17th, at 8 A. M.



## Councils to Meet

Cleveland will be the scene of much ecclesiastical activity during February. The Commission on Christian Social Action of the Evangelical and Reformed Church will have its annual meeting at the Hotel Cleveland, February 8, 9 and 10. And beginning on the tenth and running through the sixteenth the Congregational Christian Council for Social Action will be in session. The two groups will meet together on the tenth to make joint plans for future work. A cordial invitation is extended to ministers and interested lay people of our churches to "sit in."

## Explore Alcohol Problem

Shortly before Christmas twenty pastors, laymen, women's, youth, Christian education, and social action representatives of our denomination spent two days in New York City to discuss the church's approach to the question of the use of alcoholic beverages. A broad range of points of view were expressed, but in no case did the difference coincide with denominational lines and throughout a common spirit of concern and mutual respect was manifest.

As a result of the deliberations a statement was drafted, which will be submitted to the Council for Social Action and the Commission on Christian Social Action and through them, if they approve, to the General Synod of the United Church.

## Washington Seminars

Readers of *Christian Community* have received announcements of the 1950 series of Churchmen's Washington Seminars. Just to help you keep the dates before you, here they are:

February 7-10—General Seminar.

March 7-10—Rural Seminar.

April 18-21—General Seminar.

May 9-12—"Graduate" Seminar.

For information write Rev. Thomas B. Keehn, 1751 N St., N.W., Washington 6, D. C.

## CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

Requests for regular mailings or additional copies for Congregational Christians should be addressed to Ray Gibbons, Director, Council for Social Action, 289 Fourth Avenue, New York 10, New York. Requests by Evangelical and Reformed, and others, as well as news items and communications, should be addressed to the Editor, Huber F. Klemme, Commission on Christian Social Action, 2969 West 25th Street, Cleveland 13, Ohio.

## Educators to Confer February 24-25

The Council for Social Action and the Commission on Christian Social Action are calling a conference of school superintendents, principals, and supervisors to consider the question of Religion and Education. Sessions will be held at the Broadway Tabernacle Church, Broadway at 56th Street, New York City, beginning Friday, February 24th, at 2 P. M. and continuing until 5 P. M. on the following day.

Among the leaders scheduled are Dr. F. Ernest Johnson, of Teachers College,

Columbia University, and the Federal Council of Churches Department of Research; Prof. Kenneth Underwood, of Yale Divinity School; Dr. Erwin L. Shaver, Director of Weekday Religious Education for the International Council of Religious Education; and Prof. John Bennett, of Union Theological Seminary.

Reservations, or requests for information, should be addressed to the Reverend Ray Gibbons, 289 Fourth Ave., New York 10, N. Y.

## Speaking Of Books

*Modern Arms and Free Men* by Vannevar Bush (Simon and Shuster, \$1.00 in the paper cover edition). If you are a minister or a social action leader and you can spare a dollar by all means get this book. You will be fascinated. You will be appalled. You will wonder at the incredible ingenuity of modern science in the production of military weapons. You will ponder long on the meaning of the facts and opinions here set forth. So this, you may say to yourself, is what we are doing, and must do if we are going to rely on arms at all! You may feel like crying aloud against the madness of it. But the harsh fact is that unless Christians are going to advocate unilateral disarmament and a policy of non-resistance we are apparently compelled to put our best brains and much of our money into the production of the kind of arms Dr. Bush describes. It should be added that none of us ought to say much about atomic warfare unless we have first listened to Dr. Bush, or to someone who knows as much about it as he does.

*The Country of the Blind*, by George Counts and Mucia Lodge, (Houghton and Mifflin, \$4.00) is a fascinating and detailed account of the process by which the Russian dictators control the thinking of their people. It is a process so thoroughgoing and unrelenting that it fills the reader with a kind of awe. The authors quote important Russian documents in full to show, step by step, how writers, musicians, scientists and artists are kept to the line and what happens to them if they stray from it. All of us have a general idea of the rigid regimentation but no one, in my judgment, can appreciate the full meaning and extent of it unless he has read this book—assuming, as I think we can, that there is no parallel material available to us.

H. F. R.

In *The Labor Story* (Coward-McCann, \$2.50) Aline Austin has written a popular history of the American labor movement from 1786 down to 1949. Sympathetic yet not entirely uncritical, this book deserves to be known by union, non-union, and anti-union people as well, if they want to understand (as they should!) what has gone into it. A minor inaccuracy (the B. & O. strikers of 1877 were fired upon by the militia of West Virginia—p. 63) does not materially mar the work.

Several years ago the Joint Commission on Social Reconstruction of the Protestant Episcopal Church brought out the excellent Penguin Book, *Christianity Takes a Stand*. Under the editorship of Bishop William Scarlett they have issued another pocket-size symposium, *The Christian Demand for Social Justice*, a Signet Special published by the New American Library (35 cents). There are excellent discussions of the meaning of freedom, planning, communism, capitalism, and British socialism by Theodore O. Wedel, John Maurice Clark, Paul Hoffman, Victor Reuther, R. H. Tawney and others. Excellent for the church library or literature table.

Dores R. Sharpe, once secretary to Walter Rauschenbusch and his official biographer and for many years executive of the Cleveland Baptist Association, appropriately was invited to present the 1948 Rauschenbusch lectures at Colgate-Rochester Divinity School. They have been published by Harper and Brothers under the title, *Call to Christian Action* (price \$1.50). They present in provocative fashion six *musts* for the contemporary Protestant church. H. F. K.